

Making the mix work

In 2006, Russian-born lecturer **Olesya Lutsenko** came from a post at the Ukrainian State Maritime Technical University in Mykolajiv to teach maritime English and cultural awareness at the De Ruyter Maritime Institute in the Netherlands.

Her experiences have strengthened her belief that nautical students must be specially trained to deal with the multicultural working environment they are likely to encounter at sea...



Olesya Lutsenko has carried out research into the effects of mixing different cultures within ships' crews

I have been fortunate to experience mutual support and understanding since I came to Flushing in 2006, thanks to the 'welcome onboard' mentality of my Dutch colleagues and my will to integrate and socialise.

Nevertheless, when teaching, it is always important to be aware of issues such as the 'power distance' effect, passive-aggressive communication, and the superiority complex. Dutch directness and straight-forwardness did not solve all my classroom management problems. The answer, in my case, was to gain assertive intercultural communication skills which resulted in clear, open and respectful communication between me and my students.

I would like to refer to the article *The Human Element in Shipping*, published on the IMO website, in which the following question is raised: 'Why do intelligent, well-trained, highly-skilled and experienced professional seafarers make critical mistakes despite advances in technology?' It is extremely important that we should get to the root of this question so that we can introduce corrective measures.

The need for cultural awareness training among seafarers is recognised worldwide, but is it fully realised? The acquisition of intercultural competence onboard ship is an ongoing transformative process for the seafarer, working towards a state of mind which is positive, social, tolerant and free from prejudice. Intercultural competence means the ability to integrate fast, take the initiative in any new multicultural environment and at the same time to be an assertive communicator and diplomatic leader. The seafarer who has gained intercultural skills through his/her maritime education and apprenticeship is a crucial link in the processes of merchant fleet globalisation and modernisation.

It is recognised that many factors can affect a seafarer's wellbeing and safety, including power distance, group-forming, poor onboard social life, alienation, a superiority complex, a submissive attitude, aggressive or passive communication, prejudiced behaviour, and religious intolerance. Do shipping and maritime organisations realise that the ubiquitous term 'human element' has its root in cultural aspects, and that maritime education is the only available means of improving and monitoring these hidden cultural risk factors?

The legendary Titanic got into trouble not because of what the captains saw, but because of what he did not see — and what he did not see was hidden underwater and underestimated. The superiority complex in the design and management of the 'unsinkable' Titanic led to disaster. The human element can be compared to an iceberg, and through maritime education we can help seafarers to see beyond the obvious.

Step 1: We should encourage seafarers to develop an open mindset, as this competence shapes a tolerant worldview and positive attitudes towards self-improvement, learning, work and relationships. High grades for navigation or manoeuvring and high IQ scores do not always demonstrate whether a person is open-minded.

Step 2: We should ensure that seafarers understand the effect of cultural factors on seamanship and safety.

These first two steps are vital for a seafarer to function effectively in a multicultural crew. Lack of competence in these areas will create a hidden risk and a barrier to developing further intercultural management skills.

Step 3: We should teach seafarers to anticipate, recognise and deal with hidden risk factors in a thoughtful and professional manner by means of cross-cultural simulation-based training involving interaction and role-play.

During my cultural awareness lessons I do not focus on descriptions of cultures but on the above-mentioned human element. The essential training involves the development of openness, empathy and flexibility towards other cultures. Just as the course of the ship has to be adjusted to currents, winds and shallow waters to reach her destination safely, so all crew members have to adjust their attitudes, communication and management styles to create a safe, open and assertive maritime culture onboard.

My students are encouraged to contribute to a positive working atmosphere onboard, show interest in other cultures, seek relationships, look for empathy, develop active listening skills, extend their experience in giving and getting feedback, avoid all forms of prejudicial thinking and learn to work as a strong intercultural team. Students' experiences are monitored using open discussions, survey questionnaires and self-reports, which stimulate reflective competence.

Most of the students' reflections are very positive:

'Having a multicultural crew was very interesting. Different cultures didn't seem to affect the overall labour on board as well as the leisure time.'

'The Filipino crew were really good people, they have a lot of different customs that seem to be nice. I made efforts to approach them and they were very open to me.'

'I could never imagine that social life onboard could be so great!'

Unfortunately, discrepancies between classroom teaching and shipboard practice remain significant. The following students' remarks speak for themselves:

'Indonesian crew members worked very hard and were very friendly to people. I did not like the disrespectful attitude towards them.'

'A Ukrainian second officer had difficulties to accept orders from a female Dutch chief officer and did his way.'

'For three months the captain called me "apprentice".'

'I wanted to talk with a Russian seafarer but after dinner he always went straight to his cabin. He was not really open to us.'

'Every culture for itself!'

As one Indian leader said, 'The world is not a problem; the problem is your cultural unawareness'.

Maritime English teachers around the world are conscious that it is not enough simply to equip trainee seafarers with a shared language. Improving cultural awareness is also a vital part of what we do — and it is top of the agenda at our professional forum, the International Maritime English Conference (IMEC). But we need other international bodies to take a lead on this as well.

The hidden cultural conflicts within the human element can be addressed, but cannot be tackled locally, nationally or by individual shipping companies.

Worldwide cooperation between governments, maritime organisations, institutions and shipping companies is required to improve intercultural competence onboard. How are international challenges ever going to be solved if nations don't work together?

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